



Press Release

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Contact: Sean White
707-547-1908

Pam Jeane
707-521-1864

Water Storage in Lake Mendocino Approaches Record Lows

Santa Rosa, CA– The Sonoma County Water Agency (Agency) reported today that water storage levels in Lake Mendocino are decreasing due to a combination of dry weather conditions and reduced diversions of water from the Eel River to the Russian River by Pacific Gas and Electric Corporation (PG&E) through the Potter Valley Project. Water levels in the lake are now below 30,000 acre-feet, a level not seen at Lake Mendocino since 2002 when water levels reached 25,186 acre-feet.

“We are seeing the combined impacts of unusually dry conditions in the upper Russian River area at the same time that PG&E is cutting the amount of water coming into the system annually from the Eel River through the Potter Valley Project.” said Pam Jeane, Deputy Chief Engineer for the Sonoma County Water Agency. “Low water levels are of great concern to us right now because of the lake helps sustain flow in the upper river needed for a successful chinook salmon migration. Also, some local communities near the lake could lose portions of their water supply if levels fall further.” Jeane added.

On Tuesday the Sonoma County Water Agency dispatched biologists to conduct surveys of salmon breeding sites called redds in various reaches of the Russian River. Pending the results of the surveys, Agency staff will order reductions in discharge from Lake Mendocino through Coyote Valley Dam later this week in an effort to maintain storage levels. “We need to retain as much water as we can so it can be available to keep the river flowing for fish and supply local communities until the rains come.” Jeane said.

The Sonoma County Water Agency is the local sponsor for the Lake Mendocino reservoir and has authority to regulate discharges from the Coyote Valley Dam when water levels are in the range normally used for water supply purposes. Current state rules allow discharges to be cut as low as 75 cubic feet per second when storage levels drop below 30,000 acre-feet. Discharge is currently flowing at about 180 cubic feet per second.

Last April Agency staff anticipated that upper river water storage would reach critically low levels this fall and petitioned the State Water Resources Control Board to allow reduced minimum flows in the Russian River as a means to retain water for the fall salmon migration. The State Board approved the request but also issued an order to reduce diversions from the River for urban users by 15% from levels diverted in 2004. “Thanks to the cooperation of the State Board and the hard work of residents in Sonoma and Marin Counties diversions this year were cut by 21% and more than 30,000 acre-feet of water were saved for use this fall for the fish.” said Jeane. “We still have concerns but without the great effort in conservation the situation would be much worse.”

The Agency faced a similar situation at Lake Mendocino in 2002. Water storage levels dropped below 30,000 acre-feet just as the chinook salmon had returned from the Pacific to reproduce in the Russian River. Agency biologists monitored river conditions on a daily basis as discharges from the lake were cut back. “We were able to retain more water in the lake and still assure that flows in the river would support salmon reproduction.” said Sean White, Principal Environmental Specialist with the Agency. Staff collected specific information over the past six years about how changes in discharge affect the width, depth and flow velocity of the river at various locations downstream. “This information, combined with on the ground experience from 2002, will be a great help to us as a guide to maximizing the benefit of the limited water supplies available to us right now.” White added.

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